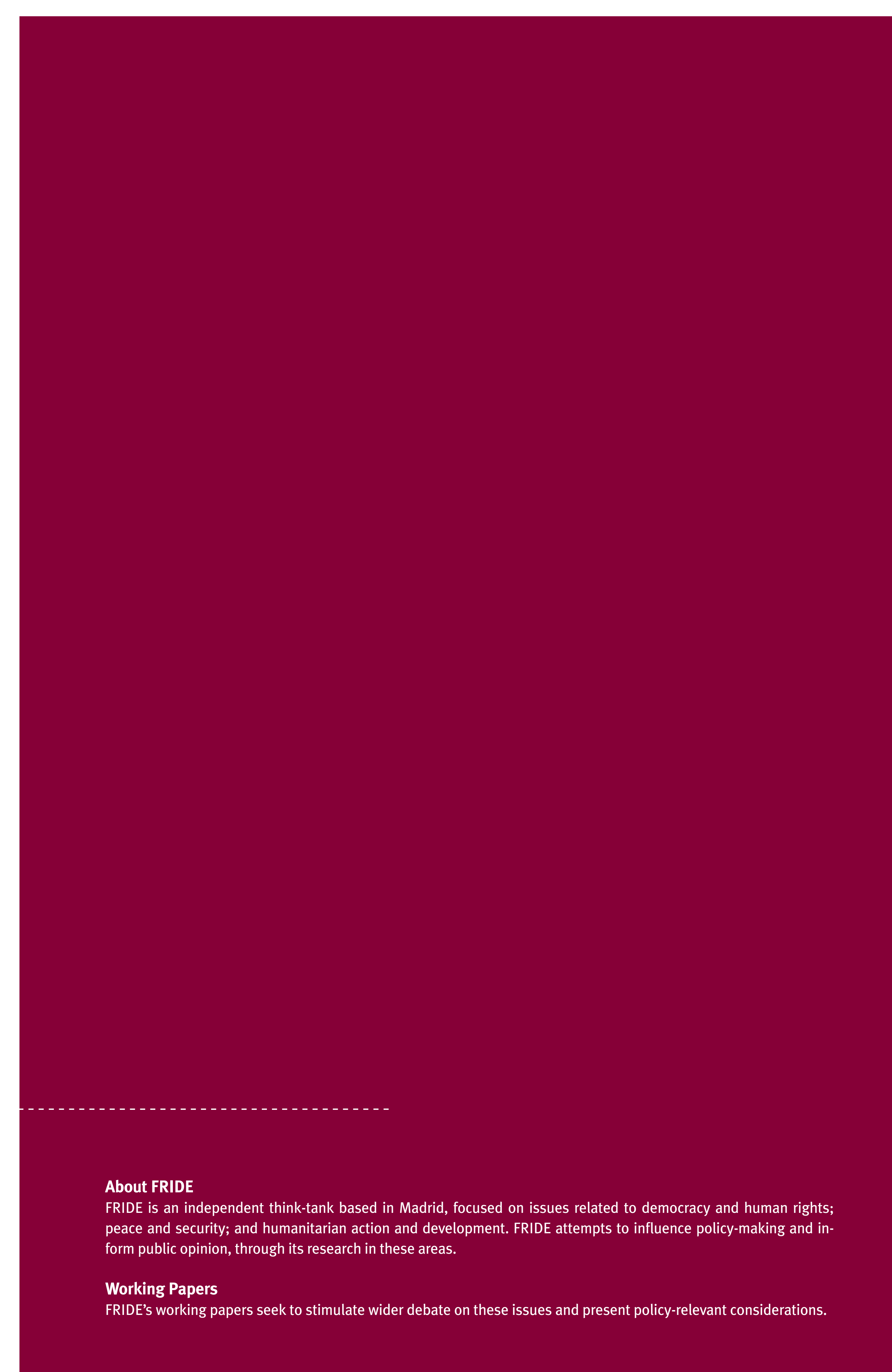
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France and the Arab spring: an opportunistic quest for influence

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›› Since the onset of popular upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), French President Nicolas Sarkozy has sought to position France as a regional leader. Most notably, France's lead on NATO's military intervention in Libya marked a turning point in French policies in the region. Yet France's attempts to project itself as defender of an ethical foreign policy in the MENA meet scepticism. A lot of attention has been paid to France's apparently proactive leadership in response to the Arab spring. But in fact the changes in French policy have been relatively limited in nature. While France has certainly helped drive forward some useful initiatives in support of Arab reform, president Sarkozy's penchant for unilateral opportunism does not augur well for consistent and coherent European support for the Arab spring.

Sarkozy's new value-based regional brinkmanship contrasts with France's past performance in the region. French foreign policy in North Africa sided with autocrats for the sake of short-term interests, with little attention to democracy or human rights. France was late in grasping the scope of the Arab spring. When mass demonstrations swelled in Tunisia in December 2010, France stepped in on President Ben Ali's side. It then continued to support Hosni Mubarak when protests hit the streets of Egypt. Only upon Mubarak's ousting from power did France finally make a U-turn in promoting military operations in Libya, proclaiming its aim to 'protect Libyan civilians'.[1]

France claims to have made a qualitative shift in its foreign policy. Portraying itself as a force for good in the Mediterranean, it aims to re-gain its long-lost regional leadership. Yet the changes remain largely superficial, focusing on discourse rather than concrete goals.

Sarkozy's actions have reflected his opportunistic attitude as opposed to genuine concern for humanitarian considerations. He has traditionally proved willing to collaborate with autocrats when it has coincided with his country's interests, but equally quick to abandon them when events have corresponded to wider regional changes in popular demands. Most recently, he has criticised Libya's Qadhafi and Syria's Bashar al-Assad, but not Bahrain's Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa or the semi-autocratic leaderships in Algeria and Morocco.

Moreover, France's solo attempts in the MENA have highlighted its limitations both as a bilateral player in the region and as a multilateral actor within the EU. In spite of NATO's

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1. UNSC Resolution 1973 (2011).



military success in Libya, France's aim to take advantage of developments in the MENA to reaffirm its own leadership position in the region and in the EU are unlikely to prove optimal either for the Middle East or for European interests.

As the Arab world continues to stir, France still has the chance to play a more constructive leadership role, consolidating its own interests as well as enhancing the EU's capacities. Yet Sarkozy is unlikely to spearhead the necessary change of attitude towards a constructive multilateralism. His policies in the Mediterranean are beset by ethical inconsistencies, the primacy of commercial interests and a desire to restore French leadership in the Mediterranean.

Prior to the MENA uprisings

›› French diplomacy has historically been closely interwoven with events in the Arab world. More recently, France has maintained its status as an influential player in the region through its engagement in Lebanon during the country's civil war ending in 1990, its participation in the 1991 Gulf War, and the privileged political and economic relations it enjoys with many Arab states.

However, France is no longer the great puppet master in the Mediterranean. As the battle for power in the region grows, France has aimed to maximise its influence over strategic issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Western Sahara conflict and energy security, by seeking to exploit its political connections with the Gulf, Algeria and Libya. Realpolitik drives French Mediterranean policy.

Many in the Arab world link current French policy in the region to the personality and idiosyncrasies of the incumbent president. When Sarkozy became president in 2007, many believed his attitude towards the Middle East would be determined by his part-Jewish origins, his decidedly pro-American attitude, and his declared attachment to the promotion of democracy and 'Western values'. Yet most of these expectations proved erroneous. From the outset, Sarkozy displayed a strong leaning towards political pragmatism. While his speeches and statements focused predominantly on human rights, democracy and the need to build peace in the MENA region, rhetoric was not matched by action. Instead, the French president proved willing to compromise on normative ideals in his dealings with almost every leader and government of the region.

Evidence for this duplicity abounds. The speeches and statements Sarkozy issued when he was head of the Ministry of Interior demonstrated his deep aversion to political Islam.[2] But, perhaps unsurprisingly, this did not stop him from pragmatically

2. See for example his televised debate with Tariq Ramadan on *France 2*, 4 April 2007.

deepening relations with Wahhabist Saudi Arabia. With Tehran's nuclear programme dominating considerations, Sarkozy's attitude towards Iran proved far tougher, and he did not meaningfully seek to improve ties between France and Iran.

France's high stakes in trade, technologies (including for military purposes) and infrastructure have traditionally given its policies in the region an economic focus. Sarkozy has sought to strengthen the presence of French companies in Iraq; foster France's contribution to the United Arab Emirates' cultural and educational infrastructures; become part of Saudi Arabia's defence strategy sector; and deal directly with diplomatically-emerging Qatar. Although previous French presidents had also sought to consolidate their commercial interests in the region, under Sarkozy business has been an especially integral part of politics.

Yet Sarkozy has shown little consistency across countries. He heavily criticised Iran's domestic political situation, as reflected in his denunciation of Iran's fraudulent elections in 2009;[3] his calls for tougher action against Tehran during the G-20 summit of 2009;[4] and his warnings of the need for dramatic action in case of the failure of nuclear talks during one of his annual addresses to France's ambassadors.[5] Compare all that to his decision to open a French military base in the United Arab Emirates on May 2009.

Sarkozy's attitude towards Colonel Qadhafi proved particularly pragmatic. Libya's leader had long been considered a pariah. Even though his announcement to give up developing weapons of mass destruction broke his isolation from 2003 onwards, few Western leaders proceeded fully to normalise their relations with Libya. Sarkozy, by contrast, offered Qadhafi political, economic and technological cooperation, visited him in Tripoli in July 2007, and welcomed him in Paris in December of the same year.[6] This attitude was heavily criticised at the national level: opponents considered that Qadhafi's official declaration of repentance, his liberation of detained Bulgarian nurses, and even his agreement to provide financial compensation to relatives of UTA flight 772's victims did not justify such a generous and early recognition of the Libyan dictator. Aside from economic considerations, it became clear that Sarkozy was also pursuing another objective: creating suitable conditions for the success of his pet project, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

Sarkozy also reversed his predecessor's policy of increased distance from Syria. French-Syrian relations had deteriorated from 2004 onwards, following hostility between Bashar al-Assad and Jacques Chirac. In 2005, the assassination of Lebanon's then-Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri led to France and Syria suspending their political and economic relations. A few months into his presidency, Sarkozy decided to offer his hand in reconciliation to Syria. From then onwards events evolved rapidly, with Assad attending the official ceremony of the July 2008 launch of the Union for the Mediterranean.

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3. *AFP*, 16 June 2009.
4. *Wall Street Journal*, 29 September 2009.
5. *Reuters*, 25 August 2010.
6. Sarkozy's interests in Libya did not entail a personal liking of Qadhafi. Following an official visit of the Libyan autocrat to Paris in 2007, Sarkozy branded him as 'crazy'. Qadhafi, on his part, used the visit to criticise France's shortcomings in terms of respect for women's rights, and encouraged the youth living in the suburbs to rebel; see *Le Canard Enchaîné*, 24 August 2011



The Union for the Mediterranean debacle

›› Before becoming president, Sarkozy had made it clear that he aspired to a greater leadership role for France at both the regional and international levels. To achieve this, Sarkozy often chose individual leadership over the soft power of multilateral diplomacy. While former President François Mitterrand had promoted strong relations and tight cooperation with Germany, and Jacques Chirac had expounded the benefits of a multilateral world, Sarkozy chose to act on his own. But as his presidency advanced, the lack of coordination with his European partners frustrated them, most notably Germany.

The Union for the Mediterranean was the most unsuccessful of Sarkozy's initiatives to revive French leadership in the Mediterranean. Despite his nominal claims to a value-based foreign policy, the UfM spectacularly failed to address the issue of human rights in MENA states.

Revamping the stalled Barcelona Process – the EU's multilateral policy framework in the Mediterranean – became a personal project for Sarkozy. Following an initial high profile launch in Paris, which was widely considered a diplomatic success for the French, the UfM suffered from over-ambition. The French President was unable to convince some of his counterparts to sign up to his ideas for a political union, namely Germany's Angela Merkel, Algeria's Mohammad Bouteflika, Libya's Moammar Qadhafi and Syria's Bashar al-Assad.[7]

Both sides of the Mediterranean reacted coolly towards Sarkozy's UfM project. Some opponents (such as Germany) considered that Sarkozy had no right to redefine the shape and fate of Euro-Mediterranean relations on his own, and less so using strong-arm methods to bring reluctant states to fora for dialogue. They also considered that the Barcelona Process was a common European project that would be undermined by unilateral national leadership. Many stressed that the UfM would neither overcome the weaknesses of the Barcelona Process, nor give them sufficient political guarantees for the future. Due to its complicated relationship with France, Algeria was reluctant to assent to the French initiative while Sarkozy had yet to offer apologies for France's role during Algeria's colonial period. On the Syrian side, the main objections were the political tensions that had preceded Sarkozy's presidency, coupled with Damascus' fears that it would be forced to normalise its relations with Israel.

Most importantly, however, the UfM was perceived by critics not as a European or Euro-Mediterranean but as a French, 'Sarkozian' project, and as such, an attempt to

7. Libya and Turkey opposed Sarkozy's vision of a Union for the Mediterranean. The latter viewed the UfM as yet another complication on its path to EU membership.

institutionalise French domination of the Euro-Mediterranean agenda. As Sarkozy ignored the divergent preferences of both his EU and Arab partners, neither European nor Southern Mediterranean states ultimately proved ready to believe in, invest in, or pursue his project. Despite being aimed at strengthening Euro-Mediterranean relations, the UfM ultimately highlighted France's and the EU's weaknesses.

France and the Arab spring

›› Sarkozy's opportunism and regional leadership aspirations have come to the forefront again in the wake of the 2011 MENA upheavals as he has sought to position himself as the implicit leader of European diplomacy, highlighting France's capacities in the region compared to its European counterparts.

Sarkozy's realpolitik in the Southern Mediterranean became unsustainable when Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak were ousted in the early spring of 2011. Both cases were particularly sensitive for France, as Ben Ali and Mubarak ranked amongst the country's closest allies. This partly explains France's backing of Ben Ali when Tunisian demonstrators were demanding his removal; and the lack of French solidarity with protestors during similar demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak. The French government's posture towards the Tunisian protests turned into a PR disaster, leading to the resignation of then Foreign Minister Michelle Alliot-Marie.[8] As Sarkozy admitted later, France had at this point underestimated the significance of the protests. It lacked a broader vision of current dynamics in the Mediterranean. Only when the Egyptian President – Sarkozy's co-chair of the Union for the Mediterranean – was forced from office did France finally understand that a serious shift was underway in the region, and adapt its policies.

Sarkozy again demonstrated his fickleness when anti-regime protests grew stronger in Libya. He shifted his unquestioning support for Qadhafi towards a firm backing of the rebels, becoming the first foreign head of state to recognise the Transitional National Council (TNC) as the legitimate governing authority of Libya.

However, in contrast, demonstrations in Algeria and Morocco engendered only mild reactions from the French President. France kept a discreet distance from events and adopted a timid stance: in mid-February 2011, French MFA spokesman Bernard Valero stated that 'what is important from our point of view is the respect for freedom of expression and the possibility for demonstrations to be organised freely and without violence'.[9] When Algeria subsequently announced its own agenda of reforms, Alain Juppé congratulated President Bouteflika for this process: 'all of this is following the

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8. Alliot-Marie's position was weakened following revelations of her support for Ben Ali, the holidays she spent in Tunisia at the time he was facing criticism in late December 2010, and the involvement of some of her family members in businesses connected with the Tunisian autocrat.
9. *Le Monde*, 14 February 2011.



right direction'.[10] France maintained this vague and uncritical tone during Juppé's official visit to Algeria in June 2011, which avoided any specific mention of the protests.

In Morocco, when waves of protests rippled through the streets of Rabat in late February, the French government proved equally reluctant overtly to criticise the Moroccan regime. The lack of criticism of Morocco can partly be attributed to France's traditionally warmer relations with Morocco than with Algeria. King Mohammed VI's reputation as a 'moderate' and his diplomacy with Western countries were also contributing factors. France seemed to take comfort in the fact that the repression of demonstrators was not nearly as violent as in neighbouring Algeria, and that King Mohammed VI publicly promised reforms in the near future. The French MFA called the King's speech of 9 March 'responsible and courageous', adding that France stood ready to accompany the Kingdom in view of 'the determination of the people and of the Moroccan authorities to achieve the announced reforms and to develop their own democratic model'.[11] The positive tone did not match the situation on the ground. Mohammed VI has yet to implement many of his reform promises.

France's stance towards Bahrain also illustrated its inconsistent support for human rights. Its initial reaction to the regime violence against protestors was to suspend exports to Bahrain (including the selling of anti-riot equipment and gear). Since then however, France has limited itself to official statements which assert its 'concern' over events, the need to end violence, and its desire for controlled change. The moderate tone towards Bahrain suggests that Sarkozy has been reluctant to condemn a majority Shi'a country so closely watched by Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia's implicit influence is also discernable in French reactions to events in Yemen. One of the first to react, the French MFA initially stated strongly that 'the excessive use of force' against demonstrators was unacceptable; 'the authors of such violence should be pursued'; and President Ali Abdullah Saleh should implement his proposals for reforms.[12] Paris also pushed for EU sanctions. Yet two months later, when Saleh refused to sign a text that could initiate a transitional period for his country, France merely deemed his behaviour 'irresponsible and unacceptable'.[13] France's initial heavily vocal stance against the regime's brutal repression of protestors subsequently became more restrained. Three main reasons may explain this relative detachment: Yemen does not form part of France's traditional sphere of influence; the tribal state's complicated internal dynamics make it hard to design a helpful response; and France is reluctant to alienate Saudi Arabia, which is keen to keep foreign actors away from the Yemeni scene.

While France was one of the main promoters of the idea of military engagement in Libya, it has not advocated the same for Syria. With the domestic situation deteriorating rapidly in Libya, France lobbied Security Council members to adopt two resolutions (UNSCR 1970 and 1973) which paved the way for military intervention. But although the situation in Syria has grown equally serious, France has limited itself to tame statements affirming Bashar al-Assad's 'loss of legitimacy'. Having invested so much in

10. http://www.algerie-plus.com/actualite/la-prompte-reaction-de-paris-au-discours-presidentiel/
11. http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo_833/maroc_410/france-maroc_1185/presentation_3361/maroc-10.03.11_90471.html
12. *AFP*, 4 March 2011.
13. *AFP*, 24 May 2011.

bringing Bashar in from the cold, Paris remains concerned that a vacuum of power might have profoundly destabilising effects if the Syrian regime were to fall precipitously.

At the European level, Sarkozy officially advocated a more prominent role for the EU in the MENA, and echoed EU statements on the region's events. However, this was done in a way designed to back up French national initiatives. In parallel, France acted unilaterally on several occasions. It backed EU funding but channelled most of its support through national programmes. While the European Commission announced in March 2011 that it would make 258 million euros available in financial support to Tunisia,[14] France declared two months later, during the G8 summit, that it would contribute 1 billion euros bilaterally to the democratic transitions in both Tunisia and Egypt.[15] Sarkozy's behaviour towards his EU partners during the Arab spring suggested that he saw no contradiction between valuing strategic EU MENA initiatives as a high priority while advancing specific French interests and priorities via unilateral moves.

This gap between French unilateralist and EU multilateralist thinking also affected immigration issues, which became more urgent in the wake of the Arab spring. Increased numbers of immigrants from North African countries did not sit well with the French public's traditional stigmatisation of Arab and Muslim communities, and were instrumentalised by the French government for political purposes.

As France prepares to enter its pre-electoral period, Sarkozy has focused increasingly on internal over external issues in the domestic sphere, including security, economy, the place of religion in society and immigration. The events of the Arab spring coincided with a reshuffle of the French government and the nomination of Sarkozy's former chief of staff, Claude Guéant, as Interior Minister, who was known for his particularly belligerent views on immigration. Guéant has since stated his desire to reduce the numbers of immigrants on French soil and limit residence permits for foreigners, professing that 'integration [in France] has failed' and unemployment rates are the highest amongst non-European foreigners.

With an increasingly immigration-averse French public, domestic electoral considerations influenced Sarkozy's Mediterranean policy. Qadhafi used migration control as a means of pressure on the EU, allowing refugees to embark freely from Libyan shores whenever he wanted to push European countries to compliance. With Qadhafi gone and effective Libyan coastline control suspended, France feared that its support for 'Operation Odyssey Dawn' would result in even greater numbers of Libyans reaching its territories. So Sarkozy presented his toughest stance yet, at the risk of breaking with EU protocol – not to mention the law.[16] While Italy chose to issue some 22,000 six-month temporary residence permits to Tunisian migrants, French border police blocked rail traffic between France and Italy. France's decision to protect its territory showed a lack of solidarity with its southern neighbours and a damaging divergence from EU norms.

French policy is still reactive, devoid of long-term vision and overly expedient in its use of the EU level. Sarkozy's repeated forays into unilateralism in the context of the Arab spring ›››

14. http://www.enpi-info.eu/files/interview/Tunisia%20press%20pack%20March%202011_ENG.pdf
15. http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/actualite/monde/20110527.OBS4073/g8-la-france-debloque-un-milliard-d-euros-pour-la-tunisie-et-l-egypte.html
16. Among the reactions to Sarkozy's decisions, see 'Des élus de tous bords lancent un audit de la politique d'immigration', *Le Monde*, 6 April 2010.



are not helping the EU or France. The lack of internal EU cohesion and coordination must be overcome for effective European leadership to take root, especially now that the decade-long inertia of Euro-Mediterranean relations has ended. For the first time, the opportunity for a mutually beneficial partnership with a newly emerging democratic, progressive Middle East is within reach.

A switch to idealism?

›› Sarkozy's successive shifts of attitude from pro-democracy (2007) to pro-realism (2008) and back to pro-democracy (2011) reflect his strong pragmatism, realism and opportunism. Before his election in 2007, Sarkozy repeatedly voiced his desire to be known as 'the human rights president'.[17] He also made it clear that he did not believe in 'the realpolitik that makes people give up values without winning contracts'.[18] France had a duty to defend its principles.

But Sarkozy's first months as president proved the contrary. His diplomacy was characterised by a willingness to renounce certain values in order to win large commercial contracts; a desire to be the architect of a renewed era between Europeans and Arabs; and an ambition to distinguish himself on the stage of European leaders. The aforementioned UfM preparations and his dealings with every single Arab leader (save Sudan's Omar al-Bashir) demonstrated as much.

Faced with criticism for his close relations with Libya's Qadhafi and Syria's Assad, the French President stood by his decisions. For instance, when asked about his relations with Libya and his decision to sell weapons and artillery to Qadhafi, he answered: 'Are you going to blame me for finding jobs and markets for French workers?'[19] He maintained that boycotting certain MENA states was counter-productive to both the West's interests and its potential to exert influence. Sarkozy preferred instead to promote a kind of 'win-win' situation, with France and its Western partners dealing directly with leaders in the region, and gaining in return strengthened strategic alliances, improved diplomatic ties and beneficial economic contracts.[20]

But paradoxically, Sarkozy's approach and actions have weakened his country's standing in the region. In 2007, when former President Jacques Chirac ended his second term, France enjoyed a positive image in the MENA region, thanks to Chirac's pro-Palestinian convictions and his opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Although Sarkozy came to power insisting on the need for an EU-MENA rapprochement and a distancing from

17. 'Je veux être le Président de la France des Droits de l'Homme'; see Sarkozy's speech of 14 January 2007 at http://sites.univ-provence.fr/veronis/Discours2007/transcript.php?n=Sarkozy&p=2007-01-14
18. Ibid.
19. *Libération*, 5 August 2007.
20. Sarkozy used France's role in the liberation of the Bulgarian nurses detained in Libya in 2007 to exemplify the benefits of not having maintained an anti-Qadhafi attitude.

American standpoints, this view did not prosper beyond the rhetoric. As a result, France's traditional diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa found itself handicapped.

Although some of its biggest national companies – Total, Suez, Veolia and Alsthom, as well as defence companies – are doing very well in the region, France has not always obtained the opportunities it expected. Total's limited presence in Syria and Libya and EADS's difficulties in lobbying Saudi Arabia to buy more defence equipment showed how the quality of French equipment does not necessarily guarantee contracts. Even Sarkozy's decision to open a French military base on the shores of the UAE, although welcomed by Arab states wary of Iranian dominion, did little to reinforce French-Emirati cooperation other than in terms of existing cultural relations.

The Arab spring underlined some of France's inconsistencies. Initially supporting Ben Ali and Mubarak undermined France's image as 'the mother country of human rights', while praising Morocco and keeping silent on Algeria contradicted its official attachment to political openness and strong reforms in the region. Finally, Sarkozy's stance on migration issues, including the closing of its borders with Italy to avoid the entrance of refugees, showed that the President was prepared to dissociate himself from his close counterparts, even if at the EU's expense.

The 2011 events in the MENA have only confirmed the balance of power that previously prevailed between influential international actors. Arab governments have traditionally preferred securing the backing of the US, rather than merely relying on the military arsenals of Russia and China. The latter two have failed to lure various Arab states away from US monopoly. Although France kick-started the recent military operations in Libya, the United States ultimately led the strategy before handing over to NATO.[21] France found itself obliged to tow the American line. Sarkozy avoided expressing overt criticism since he believed in the advantages of intervention in Libya and expected successful operations to reflect France's assertiveness amid EU hesitation. The Arab spring has proved how difficult it is for France to offer capacities which it does not really have.

In sum, France has scrambled to react to changes in the region, but its policies are still inconsistent and partial. This suggests that the change in approach is shallow, not a deep-rooted adoption of a normative foreign policy.

At present, a more systematic support for reform after the May 2012 presidential elections does not look likely. If Sarkozy is re-elected in 2012 nothing indicates he will change his recent stance towards the MENA region. But if the Socialist party wins, changes to the French diplomatic agenda could be on the cards. This would not necessarily involve a radical shift in policy, but rather new methods and rhetoric.

Three main candidates are in the running to lead the Socialists: François Hollande, Martine Aubry and Ségolène Royal. Although these candidates have yet to clarify their views on the situation in the MENA, so far nothing indicates that they would dramatically change the current direction of French policy in the region. The Socialist party has repeatedly asserted its attachment to democracy, respect for human rights, and consideration for the people's will. ›››

21. *Le Monde*, 25 March 2011.



All leading figures of the Socialist party made official statements following the fall of Ben Ali in January 2011 that insisted on the need to meet the people's demands. The Socialists would likely preserve the equilibrium Sarkozy has found in denouncing the most flagrant human rights abuses (Syria, Yemen) while adopting a lower profile on other cases (Algeria, Morocco, Bahrain). Nonetheless, they would probably be more cautious about a military intervention such as that spearheaded by Sarkozy in Libya, particularly if it were driven by the US.

Why France cannot lead unilaterally

›› Sarkozy's grand projects have so far failed to achieve their aims in France's southern neighbourhood. In the last five years, France's unilateral initiatives have been continually rebuffed. The attempt to revive Euro-Mediterranean relations under French leadership via the Union for the Mediterranean was unsuccessful. Another blow came with Israel's 'Operation Cast Lead' against the Gaza Strip in early 2008. Seeking a way out of the diplomatic deadlock facing the EU, Sarkozy embarked on a tour of several Middle Eastern countries, including Syria, in order to convince their leaders to exert pressure on Hamas to stop its rocket attacks on Israel. They rebuffed his demands, and the Israelis refused his request to end or even diminish their actions against the Gaza Strip.

Sarkozy's open-hand strategy did not always go down well with Qadhafi in Libya. When he visited Tripoli in the summer of 2007, the French president officially proposed to Qadhafi the development of a civilian nuclear programme on his territory, arguing that Libya needed energy to desalinate water. Qadhafi never answered this proposal, and eventually proved reluctant to step up commercial ties to the degree that France had hoped. France's efforts as a regional leader in the MENA are achieving much less than might be expected considering the country's privileged relations with certain countries and its long-established diplomatic and commercial ties.[22]

The success of French trade and investment in the MENA contrasts with the country's limited diplomatic performance in the region. Political relations have not kept up with the fast pace at which France has developed commercial ties with MENA countries. In North Africa, France remains Morocco's first commercial partner.[23] Tunisia also ranks among France's privileged partners in the MENA, with an average of 90 million euros of foreign direct investment (FDI) per year. France's FDI in Algeria doubled in the past decade to 220 million euros

22. See for instance http://www.dubaifrance.com/spip.php?article5812
23. http://www.francemondexpress.fr/france-maroc-un-ticket-gagnant,984.html
24. http://www.ubifrance.fr/algerie/001B1103237A+fiche-pays-algerie-2011.html

in 2009.[24] Nicolas Sarkozy's recent decision to appoint former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin as France's special envoy for the promotion of economic cooperation between the two countries is also a step forward. Yet in all these cases, France has struggled to wield any greater influence at the political level.

Political ties also lag behind economic relations between France and the Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia is one of France's major commercial partners primarily due to French sales of Airbus planes to the Kingdom. Yet the Saudis do not consider France a political partner as important as the US or China. France is only the tenth most important supplier of the United Arab Emirates, far behind China (first), Germany (fourth), the United Kingdom (sixth) and Italy (eighth).[25] Indeed, France's relations with the UAE focus on cultural and educational fields, not economics. The same is true of its relations with Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait.

In the Levant, Egypt, Lebanon and Israel are France's three main commercial partners. Yet France has little influence on negotiations in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and Sarkozy's attempt to convince the Israelis to stop hostilities towards the Palestinians yielded no meaningful results. Neither did French diplomacy in Lebanon, where France unsuccessfully sought to limit the capacities of Hezbollah. Finally, Sarkozy's proposal to name then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as co-President of the UfM did not serve to improve France's image in the region. Instead it backfired by damaging France's legitimacy at the European level.

All this demonstrates that France will only be able to achieve meaningful political results in its Mediterranean diplomacy if it acts in coordination with its EU partners. The pursuit of different and sometimes contradictory agendas amongst EU member states, combined with the EU's tendency to plan policies without taking into account available military resources, has made it hard for the Europeans to rally behind a clear, single agenda on the Arab spring, and most notably Libya.

In agreeing to be part of the UfM, MENA states acknowledged French intentions and acted with the diplomatic courtesy necessary to maintain open channels with France that could generate economic and strategic benefits in the long term. But they did not recognise Paris's claim to regional leadership. Sarkozy was mistaken to think that his pragmatism and France's close ties with the region favoured his country as a potential leader, both economically and politically. His approach did more to weaken France's image than bolster it. Neither France alone nor the EU as a whole are currently fit to steer the new geopolitical dynamics in the MENA. ›››

25. http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo_833/emirats-arabes-unis_428/presentation-emirats-arabes-unis_959/index.html



Conclusion

›› The apparent shift in France's policies towards its Southern Mediterranean neighbours in the wake of the Arab spring has been more superficial than substantive. Sarkozy's aspirations to restore France's geopolitical weight in the MENA, fuelled by his desire to maximise his chances of re-election in 2012, have if anything strengthened the French government's unprincipled unilateralism, to the detriment of any prospective effective multilateralism under EU leadership. The Libyan intervention is now presented as a success, but even here it remains to be seen if over the long, institution-building phase France can exert significant influence.

Paris should continue to build its own network in the region, but avoid acting alone. The more France contributes initiatives, advice and resources to the EU as a whole, the more it will be able to strengthen its position as one of the key architects of EU foreign policy.

France should seek to strengthen the EU's political position through member state cohesion. France's traditional influence in the MENA should be converted into a positive asset for the EU as a whole. It should undertake its political and economic investment in the MENA as part of an overarching EU strategy.

Paris must develop relations with every possible partner in the region (whether officially or unofficially) especially in the context of the ongoing Arab spring. One of the French government's main handicaps to date has been its disconnect from certain essential segments of MENA civil society (namely Hamas and, to a certain degree, Hezbollah). This has restricted France's potential for engagement in the region, as seen when France tried to open a channel of debate with Hamas in the wake of Israel's 2008 Gaza siege. By dealing openly and pragmatically with all actors, France would enhance its chances of playing the honest and active broker between some of MENA's traditional enemies.

Above all, France must acknowledge the intricate relationship between domestic policies and foreign perceptions of France. Many argue that Sarkozy's attitude towards immigration and the role of Islam in public life has not been dissimilar to the far-right positions of Le Pen's Front National. As France heads towards its 2012 presidential elections, with Sarkozy likely to run for a second presidential mandate, he will probably try to appeal to the majority of the Front National's potential voters (15-20 per cent of the electors according to most surveys). But engaging in such tactics not only disconnects Sarkozy from a large part of the population; it also encourages a negative perception of France abroad and especially amongst North African Arab states. This in turn will impact on the role France wishes to play in the region.

The statements released by France regarding the ongoing MENA uprisings should be both more coherent and more consistent. France runs the risk of acquiring a reputation for hypocrisy if it criticises certain states for their lack of reform whilst praising the symbolic window-dressing of others. France does not want to repeat its dealings with the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, coming out in support of soon-to-be-toppled dictators. If it applies the same criteria to all leaders of the region and develops arguments based on common principles, France will be more respected at the European level and in the MENA region. It will also be more likely to gain the popular support of civil society which is already shaping the region's future.

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